



## Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ

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Already in the 12th century Peter Abelard put the question to which we must at last attend in our thinking about the work of Christ, a question almost totally ignored by subsequent centuries:

If [the] sin of Adam was so great that it could be expiated only by the death of Christ, what expiation will avail for the act of murder committed against Christ, and for the many great crimes committed against him or his followers? How did the death of his innocent Son so please God the Father that through it he should be reconciled to us—to us who by our sinful acts have done the very things for which our innocent Lord was put to death?<sup>1</sup>

In a moment of candor rare in the tradition, Abelard sees the death of Christ as a murder in which we are implicated. He wonders how such an act could be considered so pleasing to God as to “satisfy” him. The question is aimed, of course, at his great contemporary Anselm, primary architect of the view of the work of Christ which has tended to dominate western Christian thinking, the doctrine of vicarious satisfaction. Anselm, like subsequent thinkers, concentrated on the sin of Adam, arguing that it was so great an affront to the divine honor that only the voluntary sacrifice of the God-man could make satisfaction for it. But such thinking diverts attention from the brute reality at hand: Jesus, the innocent one, was murdered by us. The sin of Adam, Abelard avers, was indeed bad enough, but surely it was small potatoes compared to the sin of murdering the Son of God. “Had not this very great sin been committed, could he not have pardoned the former much lighter sin?”<sup>2</sup> Far from “satisfying” God’s honor or wrath or justice or whatever, the murder of Jesus, Abelard thinks, would only make matters worse—much worse.

<sup>1</sup>Peter Abelard, “Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans,” *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather; *The Library of Christian Classics*, gen. ed. J. Baillie et al. (26 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953-69) 10.282-83.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 283.

### I. THEORIES ASIDE

The contention of this essay is that our thinking about the work of Christ today, like Abelard’s remark, must become more concrete, more in accord with the “brute reality” as it is disclosed to us in the actual events. We need something more like a “smoking gun” approach to the matter, the consciousness of being “caught in the act.” We need to be grasped more than

heretofore by the realization that Christ's work is and remains always an act in which we are involved and implicated, which cannot be translated into convenient and quiescent ideas. Indeed, the fatal flaw in most thinking about the atoning work of Christ is the tendency to look away from the actual events, translate them into "eternal truths," and thus to ignore or obscure what actually happened and our part in it. We interpret Christ's death as though it were an idea, a necessary part of a logical scheme of some sort, as though God were tied to a scheme of honor or justice making *him* the obstacle to our reconciliation. We exonerate ourselves, so to speak, by blaming the necessity for the cross on God.

So it seems at least, in most theories of atonement. In the so-called "objective" theory it is maintained that God needed the death of Jesus in order to be able to be merciful to us. *God* is the object of the atoning act. The demands of his law, or wrath, or justice had to be "satisfied." So we are exonerated because the cross was necessary to God. But the inevitable consequence of such thinking is that it doesn't finally reconcile us to God. If the cross is necessary to pay God, God will be pictured as at worst a rather vindictive tyrant demanding his pound of flesh or at best an inept subordinate caught in the same inexorable net of law and justice as we are. The theory intended to foster reconciliation actually contributes to further alienation. At bottom, that is what animates Abelard's question to Anselm. The persistent criticism of doctrines of vicarious satisfaction and substitutionary atonement since the enlightenment have the same root. The picture painted of God is too black, too contrary to the biblical witness. If the death was *payment*, how could reconciliation be an act of *mercy*? Mercy is mercy, not the result of payment. If God is by nature love and mercy, why could he not just up and forgive? Jesus, it seems, forgave sins *before* his death. Why then was the death necessary? The logic of the theory threatens the very thing it wants to promote: the *mercy* of God. To quote Abelard again: "Could not he, who showed such loving-kindness to man that he united him to his very self, extend to him a lesser boon by forgiving his sins?"<sup>3</sup>

Yet the "subjective" theory of the atonement touted by Abelard and his latter-day followers shows that the question about the murder of the Son of God was not taken seriously by them either. It is used largely as a negative foil to discredit the idea that God is the object of atonement, that the death of Jesus could have a positive effect on God. The subjective view also diverts attention from the actual event by locating the "necessity" for the cross in Jesus' own inner life and devotion and the persuasive power flowing from his example, his faithfulness unto death. Thus, it would seem, God sent his Son to a shameful and painful death to provide an example powerful enough to entice us to be reconciled to him as a God of mercy and charity.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 282.

But what then happens to the question about the murder of the innocent one? Somehow it has been whisked out of sight again by the machinery of the theory. For could not the question just as well rebound on Abelard and his followers? How can God possibly be "justified" in sending his Son into this world to be cruelly murdered at our hands just to provide an example of what everybody already knew anyway? If the cross does not actually accomplish anything *new*, is not the price too great? Is not a God who would do such a thing fully as thoughtless and cruel as the God of vicarious satisfaction? Those who push the "subjective" view rarely entertain such questions. No doubt because of the terror and cruelty of the actual event as well as our

implication in it, it has been quietly forgotten. Since it is “necessary” or at least understandable on moral or like grounds, we are (more or less) exonerated. We can sit back and admire the event that took place on Golgotha! It was *so* impressive!

Of late, those who have sought to avoid the debits of both the “objective” and “subjective” views have tended to take refuge in what Gustaf Aulén called the “classic idea” or “victory motif.” Christ’s work in incarnation, death, and resurrection is understood as victory over the demonic powers that enslave us. Instead of a merely “objective” change in God or a “subjective” change in us, Christ’s work brings about a *new situation*: the demonic powers, sin, law, death, the devil have been defeated; Christ has triumphed for us. No doubt there is much to be said for this view insofar as it seems to provide a better conceptual structure for considering Christ’s work. Something actually new is said to be accomplished in the cross and resurrection, and God’s mercy is not overly tarnished.

Yet we must ask how the victory motif fares in the light of our question. Once again the killing has been covered up. Jesus’ death is somehow necessary to defeat the demons. We are exonerated because the demons did it. God, too, is exonerated in the process because he can appear as the hero of the piece, the mighty conqueror of the demons. Since he is not the obstacle to reconciliation (at least directly), he can appear more unambiguously as a God of love and mercy.

But the question is whether all this exoneration has not been purchased at too great a price: God loses some of his sovereignty to his dualistic adversaries, and the work of Christ is translated to a semi-mythical cosmic battle quite removed from our world. We should not forget that both Anselm and Abelard were well aware of the victory idea. What bothered them, however, was precisely the question of divine sovereignty over the demons. Why should the cruel death of Jesus be necessary to defeat the demons? Surely if God is God, he could just put the demons out of commission whenever he wished. The inadequacy of the victory idea as an explanation for the actual and painful death was the *very reason* for Anselm’s question: *Cur Deus Homo?* If victory over the demons is all that is necessary, why the death? Why should God have to “stoop to such lowly things,” or “do anything with such great labor,” when he could, supposedly, just blow the demons away?<sup>4</sup>

Abelard also attacked the idea that the demonic powers provide necessary reason for the murder of Jesus. If the demons acquired the right to torment sin-

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<sup>4</sup>Anselm, “Why God Became Man,” *Scholastic Miscellany*, 110. 24

ful humanity only by divine permission, the permission could simply be withdrawn—if God is God. After all, Jesus cast out demons and forgave sins only by fiat and presence.

So what compulsion, or reason, or need was there—seeing that *by its very appearing alone* the divine pity could deliver man from Satan—what need was there, I say, that the Son of God, for our redemption, should take upon him our flesh and endure such numerous fastings, insults, scourgings and spittings, and finally that most bitter and disgraceful death upon the cross, enduring even the cross of punishment with the wicked?<sup>5</sup>

The victory motif, in short, could not provide adequate reason for the murder of Jesus. The Fathers, it should be recalled, had considerable difficulty with the question themselves. They vacillated and temporized, wondering whether the “ransom” was to be paid to the devil or not, just who had rights and who didn’t, or whether God surrendered Jesus to death to deceive the demons or to deal fairly and honorably with them or whatever. The very indecision and ambiguity led, no doubt, to the ultimate demise of the view—at least in the west—and contributed to the ascendancy of Anselmian theory. In spite of its several advantages, the victory motif, too, stands somewhat embarrassed before the hard question of what actually happened: why the murder of the innocent one? Even if the mercy and propriety of God is not overtly challenged, the question covertly rebounds on God again: If he is God, could he not have spared his Son the agony?

In sum, each of the major types of atonement theory tends to obscure the truth of the murder of Jesus in the very attempt to convey its “meaning” and “significance” to us. As a matter of fact and not just coincidentally, the theories seem to defeat their own purpose: they tend to alienate rather than to reconcile. In attempting to explain the “necessity” for the death of Jesus by taking it up in the schemes suggested, God’s “reputation” is endangered, not enhanced. Why should a God who is by nature merciful demand satisfaction? Is a God who consigns his Son to an excruciating death just to provide an example of what everyone already knew really a “loving Father”? If God is God, could not the defeat of demonic powers have been accomplished without the painful death? In other words, “was this trip really necessary?”

So we come back to our original question: Why the murder of the innocent one? What does that accomplish for us—or for God? What is “the word” of Christ? What does he actually do for us that God could not have done with greater ease and economy in some other way? The crucial and persistent question emerging from discussion of the various views seems always to be that of the *necessity* for the concrete and actual *work* of Christ among us. It is, of course, ultimately the question of the necessity for Christology at all. Cannot God just up and forgive and/or cast out demons? Or to use another current form of the question: Is there not grace aplenty in the Old Testament? Or in nature? Or in other religions even? Why Jesus? Why the *New* Testament?

<sup>5</sup>P. Abelard, “Exposition,” 282 (emphasis mine).

## II. THE BRUTE FACTS

If we are to get anywhere with these questions today, we shall have to begin by paying closer attention to the “brute facts” of the case, looking at the actual events as they have been mediated to us in the narrative itself to see what we can make of them. Perhaps this is to say, to use a distinction employed for the person of Christ, we should begin our consideration of the work of Christ “from below” (from our point of view) as much as possible before we proceed to discuss it “from above” (from “God’s point of view”)—realizing the problematic nature of such distinctions. The reason for insisting on such a beginning is not to invest theological capital in the distinctions as such, but simply to suggest that we have tended in the past to hurry by what actually happened here “below,” with us and to us, to get to the theory, the perspective “from above.” The theory has overrun the event. If we begin “from below” perhaps the impact of the work of Christ will emerge more naturally and directly from the narrative itself and we will find

ourselves “caught in the act” in more ways than one: caught *at* it and at the same time caught *by* it. If we can begin in this fashion we might be better prepared, I think, to get some glimpses “from above,” some indications (*a posteriori*, of course!) of why God could not or at least would not do it any other way.

Why could not God just up and forgive? Let us start there. If we look at the narrative about Jesus, the actual events themselves, the “brute facts” as they have come down to us, the answer is quite simple. He did! Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness, declaring the bounty and mercy of his “Father.” The problem, however, is that we could not buy that. And so we killed him. And just so we are caught in the act. Every mouth is stopped once and for all. All the pious talk about our yearning and desire for reconciliation and forgiveness, etc., all our complaint against God is simply shut up. He came to forgive and we killed him for it; we would not have it. It is as simple as that.

We don’t like, of course, to face that brutal simplicity because, I suppose, we *are* caught in the act, the act of being who we really are: sinners, fakes, liars, deniers, unbelievers. “But,” as my students sometimes protest, “don’t we really want reconciliation? Don’t we seek it and desire it?” The best answer to the question, I like to say, is “Cock-a-doodle-doo!” No doubt, Peter “wanted” reconciliation. It’s a nice “idea.” He even swore that he would not deny his Lord. But the cock crowed. Too late! Caught in the act. So it is now. The cock has crowed. It is an act, an event, not an idea. It has occurred. It is too late for all our protestations. We treat “reconciliation,” “salvation,” and “forgiveness” as though they were things, ideas, lying on a shelf somewhere which God “provides,” which we could want or not want and thus, perhaps, acquire or have more or less at will. No doubt, we might want *salvation* but what of a *savior*? One who actually *works* it, *does* it to us. What shall we do about that?

Why was Jesus killed? It would seem from the actual narrative that we should be much more careful about saying that Jesus had to die because God, at the outset, was angry with us. There is indeed a sense in which we must say that Christ’s work is to “satisfy” the divine wrath. But it is surely a mistake to say, to begin with, that Jesus was killed because God’s honor or justice or wrath was

the obstacle to reconciliation which had first to be “satisfied” *before* mercy could be shown. Surely the truth is that Jesus was killed because he forgave sins and claimed either explicitly or implicitly to do it in the name of God, his Father. When we skip over the actual event to deal first with the problem of the divine justice or wrath, we miss the point that *we* are the obstacles to reconciliation, not God. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and *you would not!*” (Matt 23:37) *We* are caught in the act. We have first to come to grips with the fact that *we* did it. The victory motif also errs in this regard when it allows us more or less to drop out of the “drama” in favor of the demonic forces. Surely the view must be deepened to say (at the very least) that the demonic powers operate *through* us, their quite willing lackeys. As it was put in a Pogo comic strip, “We has met the enemy and they is us!” We did it.

No doubt, this is a sensitive issue especially today because of the quite mistaken move in the Christian tradition to blame the Jews for killing Jesus. We have exonerated ourselves not

only at God's expense, but at the expense of the Jews. This certainly must cease. But it is hardly a gain theologically if we simply continue to exonerate ourselves by shifting the blame from Jews to Romans! There are no Romans left so we are not likely to hear much protest! But we will still have missed the point. Certainly if the death of Jesus is to have any point for us at all, we must start from the realization that *we—all of us*—did it and in countless subtle and not so subtle ways continue to do it. We are united in that, at least! The universal significance of the death of Jesus has its roots first of all in the fact that he is *universally rejected* and killed by us, not in a theory about how his death is of infinite worth or universally "satisfying." "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone" (Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; 1 Pet 2:7). Caught in the act!

But why did we kill him? It was, I expect we must say, a matter of "self-defense." Jesus came not just to teach *about* the mercy and forgiveness of God but actually to *do* it, to *have mercy* and to *forgive* unconditionally. It is an act, not an idea. That is his "work." That is the *New Testament*. He came to do "what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). Now we are, no doubt, quite open, generally, to the *idea* of mercy and forgiveness in God and his "heaven," but actually doing it *here* for God is quite another matter—especially if it is the absolutely free and unconditional having mercy and forgiving of the sovereign God who ups and has mercy on whom he will have mercy! How can one actually *do* that here? How can *this* world survive, how can *we* survive if mercy and forgiveness are just *given* unconditionally? The *idea* is nice, but what shall we do with one who *actually* eats with traitors, whores, outcasts, and riff-raff of every sort and just blows away our protests by saying, "They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick"? Actually *doing* it, giving it unconditionally just seems to us terribly reckless and dangerous. It shatters the "order" by which we must run things here.

We should make no mistake about it. One who comes actually to have mercy and to forgive in God's name is just an absolute and total threat to the way we have decided we must run things here. So either Jesus must go or we

must. But how can we—mere dying beings—surrender all our plans and gains to him? So Jesus is "wasted" as an intruder. He is crucified between two other rebels against the order of the age, a thief and an insurrectionist. But Jesus is ultimately the most dangerous because his opposition is total; he gives unconditional forgiveness. He has the crazy conviction that such unconditional saving mercy is what God and his "Kingdom" are all about, and that it is the true destiny of human beings which will make them new and pure and whole and won't ultimately hurt them at all. He seems to think that there actually is "a river, the streams whereof make glad the city of God"! In short, Jesus is most dangerous because he actually believes in God and his Kingdom, and because he himself realizes it, does it among us. To consent to that would mean (just as he said!) for us to lose the life we have so carefully hoarded. So he must go. It is a matter of self-defense.

If we can approach the work of Christ in some such fashion "from below," perhaps we can begin to see that it is a matter of being caught in the act—caught, in the first place, in the act of being ourselves, our "old" selves. God is not the obstacle to reconciliation, we are. Those who advocated the "subjective" view of the atonement were at least right in that, I expect. God is, indeed, sheer unconditional love. They were wrong, however, in thinking that *we* would in any way be open to one who actually came to *do* that among us. Consequently, the idea that Christ's

work is to effect a mere alteration in the “subject” by the example of his dedication is just another defense mechanism against the act, the *doing* of the divine love. It is translated into an idea or an ideal which serves ultimately just to reinforce the way we run things. The fact that we had to kill the Jesus who came to forgive exposes us for who we are. No mere subjective alteration will do for the likes of us. If we are to be saved by him, we must somehow be ready to receive what it is he comes to give. But that will take some dying. And that is the point. Not only are we caught *in* the act; we will have to be caught *by* the act.

### III. STARTING “FROM BELOW”

If we can begin as we have attempted, “from below,” this will open, I think, new possibilities for suggesting how the work of Christ might look “from above.” Anselm and the champions of the “objective” view were quite right in insisting that the ultimate reason and “justification” for the cross must lie in God. The persistent question through theological history has been whether

God could not have done it in some other way. If he could have, the matter recoils on him. The cross is just too high a price to pay: “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me....” Ultimately, God must answer for the cross. No doubt, that is what gives the “objective” views their right and strength. Neither the persuasiveness of the example nor the defeat of demons—nothing exterior to God himself—provides sufficient reason for abandoning Jesus to his cruel fate. Yet to say that the cross was necessary to satisfy the divine honor or wrath or justice is also clearly suspect. The event of Jesus tells us that God’s intent is simply to have mercy, that God is love.

But why then must Jesus die? Bearing in mind that this “must” is always *a*

*posteriori*, not *a priori*, not an abstract, logical “must” determined beforehand but one which flows out of what the act itself accomplishes, perhaps we can say something about how it might look “from God’s point of view.” If what we have been saying about the murder of Jesus by us is at all the case, then God’s “problem” comes more immediately into view. God’s “problem” is not that he can’t be merciful until he has been satisfied but rather that he won’t be satisfied until he succeeds in actually having mercy on whom he will have mercy. God, that is, won’t be satisfied until he succeeds in actually giving the concrete, unconditional forgiving he intends. As we can see from Jesus, God’s problem is how actually to have mercy on a world which will not have it. The question for God is whether he can really succeed in getting through to a people which likes the *idea* of forgiveness but doesn’t want an actual forgiver, a world which turns everything God purposes to do into a theory with which to protect itself *from* him. God’s problem is just how actually to *have* mercy, how to get *through* to us.

If that is the case, then at least a couple of considerations follow. As long as God is not “satisfied,” we exist under his “wrath.” But he is not satisfied because we will not let him be who he wants to be: the one who actually forgives, does it unconditionally, has mercy on whom he will have mercy. His wrath is therefore his “jealousy,” the obverse side of his intention to have mercy, to be who he will be. We are under his wrath not because of something so abstract as his “honor” or his “justice” to which “payment” must be made, but because we will not let him be who he will be for us: unconditional love and mercy.

The second consideration is that if this is the problem, *God can do nothing about it in the abstract*. Here is at least the beginning of the answer, it would seem, to why God could not do it in any other way. He cannot have mercy on us in the abstract. As abstraction he is always a terror to us, hidden, wrathful. The *idea* that he has mercy on whom he will have mercy is, as *idea*, the most frightening thing of all. We may twist and turn to change the *idea*, but all we will come up with then is that he has mercy on those who fulfill the necessary requirements. We just go out of the frying pan into the fire. The problem is simply that as abstraction God is absent from us and we are inexorably “under wrath.” Even God can do nothing about that—except to come *to* us. If the problem is absence, the only solution is presence. The only solution to the terror of the *idea* of one who has mercy on whom he will have mercy is actually *to come* and *have* mercy. The *act* must actually be done. The only solution to the problem of the absolute, we might say, is actual absolution!

So God must come *to* us to have mercy. This God does in Jesus. But why must Jesus die? Why is not just the coming enough? The answer has already been given “from below,” from our side. We will not have it. There is no “place” for the Son of Man to lay his head here. But what about “from above,” from God’s side? Why does God abandon him unto death? Why are the heavens silent at Jesus’ cry? To attempt final answers to such questions “from God’s side” is, of course, a risky and presumptuous business, but since we have suggested that previous attempts are suspect, we must perhaps make some tentative counter-suggestions at least.

Why does God abandon Jesus to be murdered by us? The answer, it would

seem, must lie in that very unconditional love and mercy he intends to carry out in act. God, I would think we can assume, knows full well that he is a problem for us. He knows that unconditional love and mercy is “the end” of us, our conditional world. He knows that to have mercy on whom he will have mercy can only appear as frightening, as *wrath*, to such a world. He knows we would have to die to all we are before we could accept it. But he also knows that that is our only hope, our only salvation. So he refuses to be wrath for us. He refuses to be the wrath that is resident in all our conditionalism. He *can* indeed be that, and *is* that apart from the work of Christ. But he refuses ultimately to be that. Thus, precisely so as not to be the wrathful God we seem bent on having, he dies for us, “gets out of the way” for us. Unconditional love has no levers in a conditional world. He is obedient unto death, the last barrier, the last condition we cannot avoid, “that the scriptures might be fulfilled”—that God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy. As “God of wrath” he submits to death for us; he knows he must die for us. That is the only way he can be for us absolutely, unconditionally. But then, of course, there must be resurrection to defeat that death, lest our conditionalism have the last word.

Or we can put it another way. Jesus came to forgive sin unconditionally for God. Our sin, our unbelief, consists precisely in the fact that we cannot and will not tolerate such forgiveness. So we move to kill him. There is nothing for him to do then but to die “for our sins,” “on our behalf,” “give his life a ransom for many.” For him to stop and ask us to “shape up” would be to deny the forgiveness he came to give, to put conditions on the unconditional. Thus he must “bear our sins in his body”—not theoretically in some fashion, but actually. He is beaten, spit upon, mocked, wasted. That is, perhaps we can say, the only way for him to “catch us in the act.” The resurrection is, therefore, the vindication of Jesus’ life and proclamation of forgiveness, God’s

insistence that unconditional forgiveness be actually given “in Jesus’ name.” To accept such forgiveness is to die to the old and be made new in him. His death is, therefore, our death. As Paul put it, Christ “has died for all; therefore, all have died” (2 Cor 5:14). One should not mistake this for a “subjective” view of the atonement. We are speaking of the *death* of the old, not a mere *alteration* of the continuously existing subject. Christ’s work is to realize the will of God to have mercy unconditionally, and thus to make new beings and bring in the new age. The “New Testament” is that since Jesus has been raised, this will is now to be proclaimed to all, actually done, delivered, given, to the end that faith be created, new beings created. Christ has died “once for all,” all people, all time. To be sure, it is a dangerous message in this age. Either we kill it by our endless qualifications and conditionalisms (and thus crucify Christ again) or it kills us and makes us new in faith and hope and love. But having died once to sin, he dies no more! The deed is done!

#### IV. WHY THE DEATH OF CHRIST?

In some such fashion perhaps we can get at least a glimpse of an answer to the “why” of Jesus’ abandonment unto death. It must lie in God’s immovable resolve to forgive, to have mercy on whom he will have mercy in concrete act,

thereby to create new beings. Even though that seems an impossible project to “this age,” it does begin in faith, and God, we are assured, intends to carry it to fruition. If that is the case, we can also suggest a somewhat different and, it is to be hoped, more acceptable sense in which Christ’s work, as tradition has insisted, “satisfies” the wrath (justice, honor) of God. When faith is created, when we actually believe God’s unconditional forgiveness; then God can say, “Now I am satisfied!” God’s wrath ends actually *when we believe him*, not abstractly because of a payment to God “once upon a time.” Christ’s work, therefore, “satisfies” the wrath of God because it alone creates believers, new beings who are no longer “under” wrath. Christ actualizes the will of God to have mercy unconditionally in the concrete and thereby “placates” God. When, that is, we are caught in the act so that we are caught by the act, God reaches his goal.